

Feedback Strategies and Content

Taken together, these three major reviews have much to say about how you, the teacher, can give good feedback. Figure 1.1 summarizes the strategic choices for feedback and makes recommendations for each based on the research. Notice that the suggestions depend on context: the characteristics of your students, the assignment, and the classroom atmosphere. There is no magic bullet that will be just the right thing for all students, all the time.

Figure 1.1 Feedback Strategies

Feedback Strategies Can Vary In...	In These Ways...	Recommendations for Good Feedback
Timing	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• When given• How often	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Provide immediate feedback for knowledge of facts (right/wrong).• Delay feedback slightly for more comprehensive reviews of student thinking and processing.• Never delay feedback beyond when it would make a difference to students.• Provide feedback as often as is practical, for all major assignments.
Amount	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many points made• How much each point	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Prioritize- pick the most important points.• Choose points that relate to major learning goals.• Consider the student's developmental level.
Mode	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Oral• Written• Visual/ demonstration	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Select the best mode for the message. Would a comment in passing the student's desk suffice? Is a conference needed?• Interactive feedback (talking with the student) is best when possible.• Give written feedback on written work or on assignment cover sheets.• Use demonstration if "how to do something" is an issue or if the student needs an example.
Audience	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual• Group/ class	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Individual feedback says, "The teacher values my learning."• Group/ class feedback works if most of the class missed the same concept on an assignment, which presents an opportunity for re-teaching.

While you are deciding on a feedback strategy, you are also, of course, deciding *what* it is that you want to say to the student. Figure 1.2 summarizes the kinds of choices you have about the content of your feedback and makes recommendations based on the research.

Figure 1.2 Feedback Content

Feedback Content Can Vary In ...	In These Ways...	Recommendations for Good Feedback
Focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the work itself • On the process the students used to do the work • On the student's self-regulation • On the student personally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When possible, describe both the work and the process- and their relationship. • Comment on the student's self-regulation if the comment will foster self-efficacy. • Avoid personal comments.
Comparison	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To criteria for good work (criterion-referenced) • To other students (norm-referenced) • To student's own past performance (self-referenced) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use criterion-referenced feedback for giving information about the work itself. • Use norm-referenced feedback for giving information about student processes or effort. • Use self-referenced feedback for unsuccessful learners who need to see the progress they are making, not how far they are from the goal.
Function	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Description • Evaluation/ judgment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe. • Don't judge.
Valence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive • Negative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use positive comments that describe <i>what</i> is well done. • Accompany negative descriptions of the work with positive suggestions for improvement.
Clarity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear to the student • Unclear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use vocabulary and concepts the student will understand. • Tailor the amount and content of feedback to the student's developmental level.
Specificity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nitpicky • Just right • Overly general 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tailor the degree of specificity to the student and the task. • Make feedback specific enough so that students know what to do but not so specific that it's done for them. • Identify errors or types of errors, but avoid correcting every one (e.g., copyediting or supplying right answers), which doesn't leave students anything to do.
Tone	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implications • What the student will "hear" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Choose words that communicate respect for the student and the work. • Choose words that position the student as the agent. • Choose words that cause students to think or wonder.

These aspects of feedback strategies and content are described further in Chapters 2 and 3, which also provide examples of what they mean. For now, the important point is that the characteristics listed in Figures 1.1 and 1.2 are aspects of feedback that research has identified as important. Further, these aspects are things you can control as you give feedback to different students for different purposes.

Feedback and Grading

Several studies, going back 50 years, have investigated the effects of grades versus comments on student performance. Page (1958) is the classic of this type of study. Page found that student achievement was higher for a group receiving pre-specified comments instead of letter grades and higher still for students receiving free comments (written by the teacher). Writing comments was more effective for learning than giving grades. Other researchers replicated Page's study many times over the years, with an interesting result; sometimes these results were replicated, and sometimes they weren't (Steward & White, 1976). More recent research has identified the problem: in these early studies about comments, the "feedback" was evaluative or judgmental, not descriptive. Page himself described the pre-specified comments as words that were "thought to be 'encouraging'" (1958, p. 180). Evaluative feedback is not always helpful.

The nature of "comment studies" changed as the literature on motivation began to point to the importance of the functional significance of feedback: how does the student *experience* the comment- as information or as judgment? Butler and Nisan (1986) investigated the effects of grades (evaluative), comments (descriptive), or no feedback on both learning and motivation. They used two different tasks, one quantitative task and one divergent-thinking task. Students who received descriptive comments as feedback on their first session's work performed better on both tasks in the final session and reported more motivation for them. Students who received evaluative grades as feedback on their first session's work performed well on the quantitative task in the final session but poorly on the divergent-thinking task and were less motivated. The group that received no feedback performed poorly on both tasks in the final session and also were less motivated.

The reason this study is of particular interest here is that Butler and Nisan's experiment illustrates several of the aspects of feedback discussed in this book. First, the comments that were successful were about the task. Second, they were descriptive. Third, they affected both performance and motivation, thus demonstrating what I call the "double-barreled" effect of formative feedback. And fourth, they fostered interest in the task for its own sake, an orientation found in successful, self-regulated learners. Butler and Nisan's work affirms an observation that many classroom teachers have made about their students: if a paper is returned with both a grade and a comment, many students will pay attention to the grade and ignore the comment. The grade "trumps" the comment; the student will read a comment that the teacher intended to be descriptive as an explanation of the grade. Descriptive comments have the best chance of being *read* as descriptive- if they are not accompanied by a grade.

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